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Heterosociality at the Crossways: Cultures of Conversational Exchange between Men and Women in the Fin de Siècle

In her 1936 autobiography, *The Sheltering Tree, fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian writer Netta Syrett takes popular retrospectives of the late-Victorian era to task. Offering her account as a "counterblast" to the "picture" of "the terribly restricted life of women whose youth corresponded with" hers, and laughingly dismissing the separate spheres as a relic belonging only to "society with a capital S," Syrett reclaims the 1880s and 1890s as a period of shocking modernity: one that afforded women relatively unconstrained mobility and opportunities for financial independence (5). Later on, however, she marks a clear shift between generations: whereas "nowadays damsels of eighteen . . . take part in the . . . discussions that I heard at the Grant Allens," she writes, many "topics" of interest to the New Woman novelists "w[ere] not" items "for discussion in public" (46-67). For Syrett, measuring the progress of her present against the Victorian past, freedom of conversation in mixed company was the final frontier gained by the modern woman. Describing a "love of conversation" that "had never been thoroughly gratified" (43) in "ordinary society" (46), Syrett looks backwards to the eighteenth-century as well as forwards to the twentieth, tellingly lamenting that "I sometimes think I managed very badly in not arranging to be born in the age of the *salon*!" (43). The Victorian era, then, in Syrett's narrative as in broader historical ones, lies suspended between the heterosocial glories of past salons and the heterosocial possibilities of subsequent modernity.

Although culturally-sanctioned spaces for such interactions receded during the nineteenth century, George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* (1885) locates future equality between the sexes in the creation of new spaces for these exchanges. Indeed, from her prolonged involvement

with “the Yellow Book set” to her political debates and conversational encounters with New Woman novelists including Allen, Meredith, and Thomas Hardy, numerous episodes within Syrett’s own memoirs contemporaneously chronicle revitalized interest in nurturing such dialogue. In this paper, I will explore how radical late-Victorians imagined conditions for heterosociality, critiqued the dominant cultures that limited its cultivation, and attempted to negotiate an alternate model of sociability. In particular, I turn to the uses of conversation in Meredith’s novel as a literary case study of such experiments, contextualizing Diana’s Sunday night dinners, which bring the “elect of London” together, within the cultures of conversational exchange, intellectual debate, and gendered club-life of the 1880s. Looking to the middling details of such forms, I argue, allows us to recover the Victorians’ own preoccupation with the re-emerging possibilities of a more expansive sociability between the sexes. On a broader level, it affirms a social politics of late-nineteenth-century narrative form that emphasizes mutual relationality and the dynamic back-and-forth of exchange over the teleological drives of plot.[i] Examining these literary forms of sociability also sheds new light on the political turn at the end of the century toward framing the “woman question” more explicitly as a “human-question” (Grand 379). If, as Sarah Grand writes, the “combined interests of men and women . . . [could] not be separated,” cultivating relationships that emphasized such connective possibilities became not only individually desirable, but also strategically necessary (379). Reading for conversation and its political and social uses, I argue, thus brings the relational project of late-Victorian feminism to the forefront.

I. “Not . . . Born in the Age of the *Salon*!”: Separate Sociabilities and The Fear of the Clubbable Woman

Scholars have long challenged the effectiveness of separate spheres ideology and its neat binaries between man and woman, public and private as an interpretative framework for reading social relations in the period—calling attention to the "uneven developments" of its cultural logics (Poovey *passim*) and the "play" women found "within [its] system[s]" (Marcus 27).[ii] Yet, despite a broad dismantling of the separate spheres, the narrative of the Victorian period as the age of separate sociabilities persists in the critical imagination.[iii] In part, with very good reason: codes of conduct and perceptions of reputation, rigid regulations surrounding chaperonage and appropriate topics for discussion, gendered modes of and spaces for education, and the active exclusion of women from all-male professional spaces such as the literary club all actively contributed to the social estrangement of men and women, and to the development of separate structures of sociability often only allowed to intersect in the pursuit of marital and domestic combinations.

As cartoons depicting early cultural backlash against motions to include women in established clubland illustrate, social freedom and freedom from marriage were inextricably linked. And models of female sociality that allowed for a vast network of multiple conversational partners, whether only other women or men as well, were viewed as antithetical to an intimate matrimonial union of two.[iv] To be social, in this broader sense, was thus to reject or even to regret marital resolution. George du Maurier's "Female Clubs v. Matrimony," for example, published in *Punch* in 1878, positions "the charms of clublife" as a direct threat to domesticity, and a dangerously convincing case against the obligations and the isolations of heterosexual marriage. "With a sigh of regret for the freedoms of spinsterhood," Mrs. Bolingbroke Thompkins must return to her "poor Bolly all alone." The ultimate threat of a more expansive female sociability, then, lies not only in rendering married life comparatively unattractive, but also in the

assumed consequence of men's relegation to the isolated domesticity that they themselves would impose on women. The notion of expanding the inner sanctums of male clubs to match the increasingly heterosocial urban landscapes outside their doors provoked similar reactions. As Sir John Gilbert writes below his caricatured sketch of "Miss Bicknell's Plan for the Garrick Club Smoking Room" (1870), "the Gentlemen would be driven away, back into drafty corners, anywhere in fact." "With feelings of terror, alarm, and indignation," he writes, and "the alarming encroachments on all sides," then, the male members of the Garrick Club eventually debated the possibility of allowing women into their midst in the early 1880s. The proposition was quickly struck down by majority.

A few years later, however, George Meredith, a member of the Club since 1864, put pen to paper on the issue of heterosocial interaction, writing entirely on the side of the New Woman barred from entry. While *Diana of the Crossways* makes no explicit mention of the denial of such membership to its protagonist, it is no coincidence that all-male clubs and the homosocial bonding that occurs in their smoking rooms feature prominently in the novel as sites for misogynistic gossip-mongering against the free-spirited Diana, whose witty banter and outspoken political opinions encroach upon the territory of masculine conversation. Nor that, upon establishing her own heterosocial circles through weekly Sunday evening dinners, the first "change" that Diana "institutes" to social forms is to do away with her "aversion," "that break between men and women after dinner" mandated by the rules of hosting (173-74). In its stead, Meredith sketches an alternative vision of comfortable "social vivacity, mixed with comradeship of the active intellect," as men and a few odd-women-in discuss the political issues of the day and exchange comic tales (Meredith 278). While far from realizing a utopian freedom from gendered power dynamics or social forms, such portraits of mixed-sex conversation as a

mutually beneficial exchange of political knowledge, social education, and literary status could not provide a greater (or more pointed) contrast to Gilbert's dystopian vision of an inverted Club, overrun by large circles of cigar-wielding ladies, whose mere presence pushes men to the cold, drafty margins of discourse. On the contrary, in looking backwards to look toward the future of the New Woman, Meredith posits a new model for the mixed-sex club that at once predicts the failures of such experiments and anticipates their potential for feminist politics. [v]

II. "A flash of her matchless wit": Formal Affordances of Conversation in the New Woman Imagination

Framing emerging articulations of the Woman question through the criminal conversation trials of the early century, Meredith offers a scathing critique of the limitations imposed on female sociality. As Randall Craig has noted, certain social circles indict Diana on "two counts of 'criminal conversation': first, speaking freely with men in the absence of her husband (and their wives), and second, professing independent political opinions" (Craig 161). Indeed, the central dilemma of the novel's titular heroine lies in her inability to reconcile her own desire for freedom of conversation with implicit social forms governing the laws of reputation: "the liberty she allowed herself in speech," as Meredith notes, proves "trying to her defenders in a land like ours," but "she, especially with her multiple of quick perceptions and imaginative avenues, her rapid summaries, her sense of the comic, demanded this aerial freedom" (7).[vi] Meredith's narrative commentary on the social uses of such "free" dialogue, however, uniquely seeks to decriminalize heterosocial conversation. Penned in a decade poised between the increasing separation of the sexes through the rise and reification of the all-male club and the burgeoning revival of intellectual heterosocial salons, *Diana* offers a history of heterosocial conversation at the crossways of the early nineteenth century and the *fin de siècle*. While much might be (and

has been said) about the novel's representation of Caroline Norton's political salons in the decades leading up to the repeal of the Corn Laws, for the sake of time, this paper focuses instead on the new resonances of mixed-sex conversation in the era in which male retreat from female company in a "flight from domesticity" (Tosh *passim*) collided with the advancement of New Woman causes.

In a thorough critique—addressed to the novel's male readers, ostensibly perusing these pages from the armchairs in their own clubs—he takes as his target the "uncivilized" circulation of narratives distorted by club gossips. As Amy Milne-Smith demonstrates, the political intrigues, intellectual discussions, and chatty anecdotes that populated member memoirs only tell half the tale of the all-male club; the majority of such "rituals of privileged talk," she notes, instead revolved around court cases, particularly divorce scandals and the women dragged into the center stage of such spectacles ("Club Talk" 87). Meredith frames his own corrective account in opposition to those circulated within these exclusive smoking rooms, writing:

> That cry of hounds at her disrobing by Law is instinctive. She runs, and they give tongue; she is a creature of the chase. Let her escape unmangled, it will pass in the record that she did once publicly run, and some old dogs will persist in thinking her cunninger than the virtuous, which never put themselves in such positions. . . . It is the test of the civilized to see and hear, and add no yapping to the spectacle. (7)

The "yapping" of "old dogs" within the club becomes, in Meredith's formulation, metonymic with the hunt: a popular motif of sexual and domestic violence here employed to challenge the role that predatory gossip played in shoring up male authority within homosocial spaces.

If Meredith himself did indeed add more "yapping to the spectacle"—as the note subsequently added to *Diana*'s preface urging readers to interpret the novel as "pure fiction"

might attest—his novel nonetheless raises a crucial question regarding the "social uses" and the political abuses of talk (Meredith 124). Throughout *Diana*, male wit, as scathingly described above, is often broken upon the "disrobed" bodies of women exposed to scandal.* Later on in the novel, however, after one such "old dog" literalizes these figurative acts of predation by attempting to sexually assault Diana, Meredith renders a similar exercising of wit her only effective "weapon" for reasserting her personhood: "A flash of her matchless wit now and then reduced him to that abject state of man beside the fair person he has treated highly cavalierly, which one craves permission to describe as pulp. He was utterly beaten" (48). Whether a tactic deployed toward dehumanizing or rehumanizing ends, forms of sociable speech, within Meredith's circulating, episodic plots, direct our attention to the "affordances," to borrow Caroline Levine's term, of dialogue in the New Woman imagination (*Forms* 6), to the "historical potential that inheres in [its] techniques" ("Strategic Formalism" 636).[vii] That is, a well-directed "flash of wit" might, in elevating a victimized body to a lofty intellect, reduce an assailant to an "abject pulp." Elsewhere, Diana gathers a "cheap[er] wit," the "anecdote," as a "weapon" for deflecting "dialogue" from "perpetual fresh supplies of scandal" that proves especially useful in its "portab[ility]"; "unlike the lightning flash, which cannot be put in the pocket," anecdotes "might be taken home and dispensed at other tables" (Meredith 124). In other words, Diana, as a savvy hostess—and as a woman constantly navigating gendered structures of sociability—such forms contain their own strategic forces, their own "social use[s]" (Meredith 124).

In self-consciously acknowledging these forces, the "particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford" (*Forms* 6), Meredith and his heroine thus ask us as readers—both of texts and of social worlds—to consider the difference between "the cry of the hunt" and the mutuality of debate, between gossip and a conversational exchange.[viii] The

difference lies between a woman made text by predatory reading and not only a speaking subject, but a subject that speaks back. Combining the clubbable anecdote and contestations of wit with metacommentary on the very sexual relations that undergird such forms, segments of dense dialogue throughout Diana's dinner scenes provide dynamic sites for reading heterosocial exchange. Such episodes of conversation are populated, almost entirely, by formal features often cited as stylistic failures of the New Woman novel, and indeed the Victorian novel more generally: digressions, thick "philosophical descriptions" (Garcha), opaque intellectual allusions, and, perhaps the most frequently damning of all for the formalist critic, the overtly polemical. Following Amanpal Garcha's provocative call to reexamine moments of plotlessness within the novel, however, I want to argue that these very failures might be read as some of the late-century novel's most politically disruptive features.

Lingering in the descriptive details within novelistic middles, reading for episodes that fail to matter to the resolution of plots, highlights one of the most productive affordances of conversation. As a formal structure, it provides a way of reading the individual's relationship to the social as an open-ended relationality, rather than as a process of development that culminates in a complete and conclusive integration; as a political tool, it promotes a more expansively heterosocial public sphere, rather than a series of homosocial socialabilities whose primary site of overlap remains marriage. The heterosocial salon—with its multiple conversational partners, personally distant and socially dynamic intellectualism, and open investments in public affairs—also offers a model beyond the fraught intimacies of individual friendships between the sexes in the novel.[ix] Even Redworth—described repeatedly throughout as "a man who could truly be 'the friend of women'" (Meredith 271)—fails to fulfill the promise that private friendships with men held for New Women like Diana and her friend Lady Dunstane. Lady Dunstane, envisioning that

increased access to public affairs might be obtained from such intimacies, is met with disappointment when Redworth's solicitation of advice proves directed only toward the end of making a match with Diana, and, Meredith writes, "she ridiculed herself for having imagined that such a man would come to consult her upon a point of business" (53). In cultivating spaces for heterosocial conversation, then, Diana makes it her business to transform a private dyad of exchange on private matters to a social network for the discussion of public concerns.

III. The Dream of a Common Understanding: Mixed-Sex Clubs and the Politics of Relational Possibility

In the time remaining, I'd like to step into Diana's after-dinner salon to take a closer look at these conversational exchanges, at a key moment of crisis in which interludes of expository dialogue turn to the current state of social relations between men and women. A chapter entitled "Dialogue Round the Subject of a Portrait, with Some Indications of the Task for Diana" exemplifies the collision of these structures. As its descriptive title indicates, talk about an actual portrait circulates into a descriptive narrative discourse that sketches not Diana herself, but rather the general "task" imposed on a woman in her position by the social world: the delicate maintenance of publicity as an exceptional wit torn between codes of feminine propriety and forms of elite masculine discourse. A moment of interruption, splitting the seams between these negotiated identities, occurs when, citing one of her father's anecdotes in a debate about dueling, Diana elides an expletive from a widely circulated quotation.* Her opponent in the debate, Sullivan Smith, instead of rebutting the central argumentative point reverts to the stylistic rules and clubbable forms of "the anecdotal gentleman" (273). Turning to his neighbors, Lord Whitmonby and Percy Dacier, he offers only a disdainful, corrective aside: "A lady's way of telling the story! . . .she had to *Jonah* the adjective. What the poor fellow said was' . . . [and] he

murmured the sixty-pounder adjective, as in the belly of the whale, to rightly emphasize the noun" (Meredith 272-73). As Whitmonby "nod[s] to the superior relish imparted by the vigour of masculine veracity in narration" (373), Meredith's narrator makes explicit the "contempt for women compelled by their delicacy to spoil that kind of story which demands the piquant accompaniment to flavor it racily" (273). Lady Pennon and a contingent of other ladies read such exchanges as evidence only confirming that the sexes constitute "two different species" entirely (Meredith 273). In a characteristic move of conversational strategy, however, Diana ironically attributes the poor argumentative reply to the very arguments against female participation in debate: "it is the trick men charge to women," she muses, "showing that they can resemble us" (273). Diana thus mimics the structures of the club's exclusive conviviality, matching wit for wit, while simultaneously disrupting the very spatial, social, and sexual divides that constituted its boundaries.

Mixed-sex clubs, likewise, formed, at least in the ideal, sites for radical forms of sociability between the sexes on the very structural foundations of male retreat. Intellectual debate as a forum for the advancement of women's causes in practice, however, encompassed structures of both amity and enmity, cooperative exchange and dramatized conflict. In 1885, mere months after the full publication of *Diana* in extended three-volume form, Karl Pearson commenced his controversial Men and Women's Club. The club's membership was to be composed of equal numbers of men and women, and according to the minutes of its first meeting in July 1885, the club's foundational purpose was to discuss "all matters . . .connected with the mutual position and relation of men and women," ranging from mixed-sex friendship to prostitution, sexuality, and issues of reproductive choice (*Minutes*). The ostensible goal of such an experiment in free communication between the sexes was the ultimate reform of relations

between them.* As Pearson's opening paper on "The Women's Question" states, "there is little hope of real reforms unless men and women know one another's aims and views in detail and accept to some degree the same standard—the same ideal for the community" (K. Pearson, The Women's Question, July 1885). [Here, I should note, Pearson quotes fellow member Annie Eastty without attribution, so you can see already how such "standards" were going to go]. As Judith Walkowitz notes, in the immediate aftermath of W. T. Stead's expose of child prostitution in London, surprising numbers of women responded to the prospect of being able to "relate" their fears to men and of employing conversational exchange as a political tool toward achieving reform and relational understanding. For the women of the club, intellectual discussion promised a respite from, as one member Maria Sharpe phrased it, "the dark shadow" of "the region where women are bodies only to men" (qtd. in Bland 44). Like the debate at Diana's dinner, then, questions of masculinity and violence formed the foundation for explorations of the relationship—present and future—between men and women. Unfortunately, however, the project of "accept[ing] . . . the same ideal for the community" proved an infamous failure. The limitation of legitimate discourse to scientific objectivity, as well as Pearson's obsession with sexual pleasure and eugenic reproduction, rendered mostly formally uneducated women, who might answer back only with narratives of personal experience, bodies only once more, mere objects of study.[x] A space dominated purely by discussions of sex was not compatible with the radical future emancipation imagined and desired by its women members. Their interests, with the exception of Olive Schreiner's investments in free love, lay in instituting "a mental revolution in men" (Sharpe, qtd. in Bland 45) and greater constraints on their sexual practices, alongside creating greater spaces for celibate sociality, ideal love, and "intellectual stimulus" for women (47).

This "chasm" between the conversational goals and expressed desires of men and women for their relational future, while too wide and "unpassable" to be bridged "by club debate," as Lucy Bland concludes, nevertheless constitutes an important formal structure of debate that aligned conversational exchange with reformative strategy in the late-Victorian period. Back at Diana's table, the battle of the sexes rages on, and the philosophical dialogue of the narrative, alongside the cycles of intellectual conversation that emerge as the chapter's centerpiece, both enact and disrupt the very social dynamics that separate the sexes. In Meredith's formulation of the history of heterosocial conversation, the acknowledgment of a vast gulf between social worlds and the attempt to bridge this distance through the relational possibilities of exchange proves, like the ideal of the form itself, mutually constitutive. As the "Dialogue Round the Subject of a Portrait" takes a final turn toward essayistic presentations of the future independence of women, a final chasm emerges. On the one hand, the men sketch an apocalyptic vision, a "shock of battle for the possession of the earth" with women "no longer the weaker" sex but rather "frightful hosts" (276). Diana, on the other hand, "promises a sweeter picture, if ever she brought her hand to paint it" (276). Although this "picture" of a "sweeter" future remains vague, her parting sally and final plaintive question prove telling: "They put us in a case, and profoundly study the captive creature . . . but will any man ever understand" (276).

This query later resonates with another unanswered plea, posited as intellectual exercise, uttered by Diana toward the novel's conclusion: "Could the best of men be simply a woman's friend?" (Meredith 364). After hundreds of pages detailing the violence of Diana's sexual experiences alongside her desire for mythic proportions of celibate coldness, her question might very well read: why can't men and women ever be merely sociable? As Barbara Leah Harman has noted, mid-century discourses, lingering long into the *fin de siècle*, elided the social mixing

of men and women with sexual promiscuity. Clearly at stake in Diana's desire for "simply . . . a friend," then, was the status of women as equal citizens, free to co-inhabit a masculinized public sphere.[xi] Crucially tied to such questions as well, however, was the permitted shape of their interiorities, the range of their mental and emotional lives deemed both imaginatively possible and narratively plausible. To remove the threats of sexuality from so-called "promiscuous company," to take up space as more than "bodies only," to advocate for a more expansive space for asexual sociability alongside a greater one for sexual pleasure: if the records of the miscellaneous women members of Pearson's club provide any indication, such desires extended far beyond the confines of *Diana*'s attempts at conversational reconciliation. We find the unfulfilled dream of common understanding echoed in the utopian daydreams of Rebekah Drummond, the protagonist of Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man, or Perhaps Only*. Although published posthumously in 1926, Schreiner composed the majority of her final novel in the course of her short participation in the Men and Women's Club. Suspended in a novel that never reaches its own conclusion, Rebekah fantasizes about "be[ing] one of a company of men and women in a room together, sharing somewhat the same outlook on life and therefore thinking the same thought, and able to understand each other without explanation--a thing she knew was possible somewhere in time and space" (174). Reading late-Victorian heterosocial conversation, with its imagined possibilities and fraught failures, allows such a vision to take form beyond its own limited present: as "somewhere in time and space," or as Diana phrases it "far" in the "future" (Meredith 276).

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[i] Previous critical studies of heterosociality in the nineteenth century examined its reformative effects on marriage, as a plot and as an institution. See, for example, Albow; MacDonald; Schaffer. This paper, and this project more generally, instead seeks to analyze heterosocial relations that are never—and don't desire to be—resolved into teleological marital closure

[ii] For a wide range of studies on the more public resonances of women's roles during the period, see, for example, Cohen; DiBattista and Nord; Gleadle and Richardson; Harman; Langland. On men's negotiations with their place within the domestic sphere, see Milne-Smith; Tosh.

[iii] On the predominance of same-sex sociability during the period, see Phillipa Levine.

[iv] For further discussion of such anxieties, see Black, in particular the epilogue, "A Room of Her Own."

[v] As Milne-Smith writes, the rise of homosocial male cultures might be considered a "flight *to* domesticity," as "for members of 'Society,' a London house was explicitly a public façade for the social season, providing little privacy or emotional release" and was essentially a public place ("Flight" 797).

[vi] For Meredith as well, the comic element within conversation held an emancipatory power in his imagination. In his 1877 essay "On the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit," he writes of his desire for a future of equality, a society of "cultivated men and women … wherein ideas are current and perceptions quick"—a society of equals engaged in this "aerial freedom" of verbal exchange without which, he asserts, comedy itself is impossible (qtd. in Harman 82).

[vii] In considering conversation between the sexes as a formal strategy, both within the literary imagination and within histories of feminist movements in late-nineteenth-century Britain, Levine's method of "Strategic Formalism" is an invaluable tool. Tellingly, the alternate term which she proposes to describe this method is "social close reading" ("Strategic" 632), and elsewhere she calls for "the expan[sion of] our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience" (Forms 2).

[viii] Previous work has positioned oral cultures of storytelling at the heart of novel form's development. See for example, Kreilkamp. Narrative discourse, particularly within the realist novel, has often been aligned, via the form of free indirect discourse, specifically with the conservative effects of community gossip. Meredith's realism, with its antagonistic narrative stance toward existing modes of circulating scandal might, in this case, be read as a corrective to the "gossip" of previous Realisms.

[ix] As Bryan Mangano argues, narrative discourse in the eighteenth-century novel justified as realistic due to epistolatory form (the importance of everyday detail or irrelevancy in the discourse between friends); conversation as an embodied exchange proves more public and therefore less "intimate" in his formulation of ideal friendship. This publicness, however, is precisely what Diana desires and strives toward at the end of the century.

[x] For a contrasting model of discourse between the sexes, see La Vopa's discussions of honnêteté in eighteenth-century mixed-sex salons.

[xi] See Harman. In her introduction, entitled "In Promiscuous Company," Harman discusses the ramifications of "the association between access to public life, freedom of movement, and sexual impropriety" from the mid-century origins of the women's movement through early Edwardian suffrage movements (5). One particularly striking example makes the consequences of conflating sexuality with questions of space and mobility: William E. Aytoun's "The Rights of Woman" published in Blackwood's in 1862 raises rape as the specter of a threatened punishment for women who seek to join professions that would place them in mixed company with men.